DATA FIRST

Harnessing the potential of linked administrative data for the justice system

ADR UK

Data First research outputs:

Guidance for researchers accessing data via the Office for National Statistics Secure Research Service

Version 1.2, November 2026

1. Introduction

This guidance explains the requirements for sharing and reviewing research outputs that use Ministry of Justice (MoJ) Data First data accessed via the Office for National Statistics (ONS) Secure Research Service (SRS).

As part of the conditions of access to Data First datasets, researchers are required to share outputs with the Data First team before publication, public release or submission for peer review, whichever is earliest. Researchers should allow at least two weeks for review, and should be aware that, where revisions are required, clearance may take longer.

- The review process helps ensure that:
- confidential information is protected;
- outputs comply with statistical disclosure control requirements;
- research remains within the scope of the approved project;
- any project-specific conditions are met;
- Data First datasets are appropriately acknowledged; and
- findings can be disseminated safely and responsibly.

The review process is not an academic peer review and nor should it replace it. Rather, it helps ensure that outputs comply with the requirements associated with the use of Data First data.

In some circumstances, the team may provide feedback or advice on an output. This feedback is intended to support researchers and maximise the quality and impact of outputs, but it is not a condition of clearance. Such feedback will be clearly distinguished from any changes required to receive formal clearance. While MoJ encourages researchers to consider this feedback, addressing it remains at researchers' discretion.

Outputs produced using Data First data remain the sole responsibility of the researcher. MoJ does not take ownership of, or responsibility, for the analysis produced. Clearance does not imply that MoJ, or any other parties involved in the review, endorse the analysis, findings, implications or recommendations arising from the research.

Upon publication of research outputs, researchers must provide a copy to the Data First team (datafirst@justice.gov.uk) so that the research can be shared with relevant policy and analytical colleagues. The research will also be added to the MoJ's internal Evidence Library.

2. What is a research output?

A research output is any material a researcher seeks to take out of a Trusted Research Environment (TRE), or any written, visual or recorded product that uses data taken out of a TRE.

We distinguish between:

- outputs taken directly from a TRE (see section 2.1); and
- derived or final outputs that use data or results previously released from a TRE (section 2.2).

These categories are reviewed in slightly different ways.

2.1 Outputs from a Trusted Research Environment

Outputs from a TRE are any outputs taken directly from a secure research environment, such as the ONS SRS. quote

Outputs released directly from the ONS SRS must be cleared through the ONS output-checking process and approved by MoJ on behalf of data owners before release.

The Data First team aims to complete reviews of outputs within two weeks. Where clarifications or changes are required, additional review time may be needed. In such cases, the review period will run from the date the revised output is resubmitted.

Researchers can also produce outputs within a TRE which are intended for publication or wider dissemination. Such outputs will be reviewed by both ONS and MoJ against the criteria set out in section 4 of this guidance.

Further information on ONS SRS output checking is available through the ONS guidance Supporting your research project.

2.2 Derived and final outputs

Derived and final outputs are publications or dissemination products that use data or results that have already been cleared through the TRE output-checking process (as set out in section 2.1).

Examples include:

- journal articles;

- research reports;
- blogs;
- conference papers;
- conference presentations;
- policy briefings; and
- other publications using Data First data.

All derived and final outputs using Data First data must be shared with the Data First team two weeks before peer review, publication or release, whichever is earliest. Researchers should normally submit outputs in final or near-final draft form.

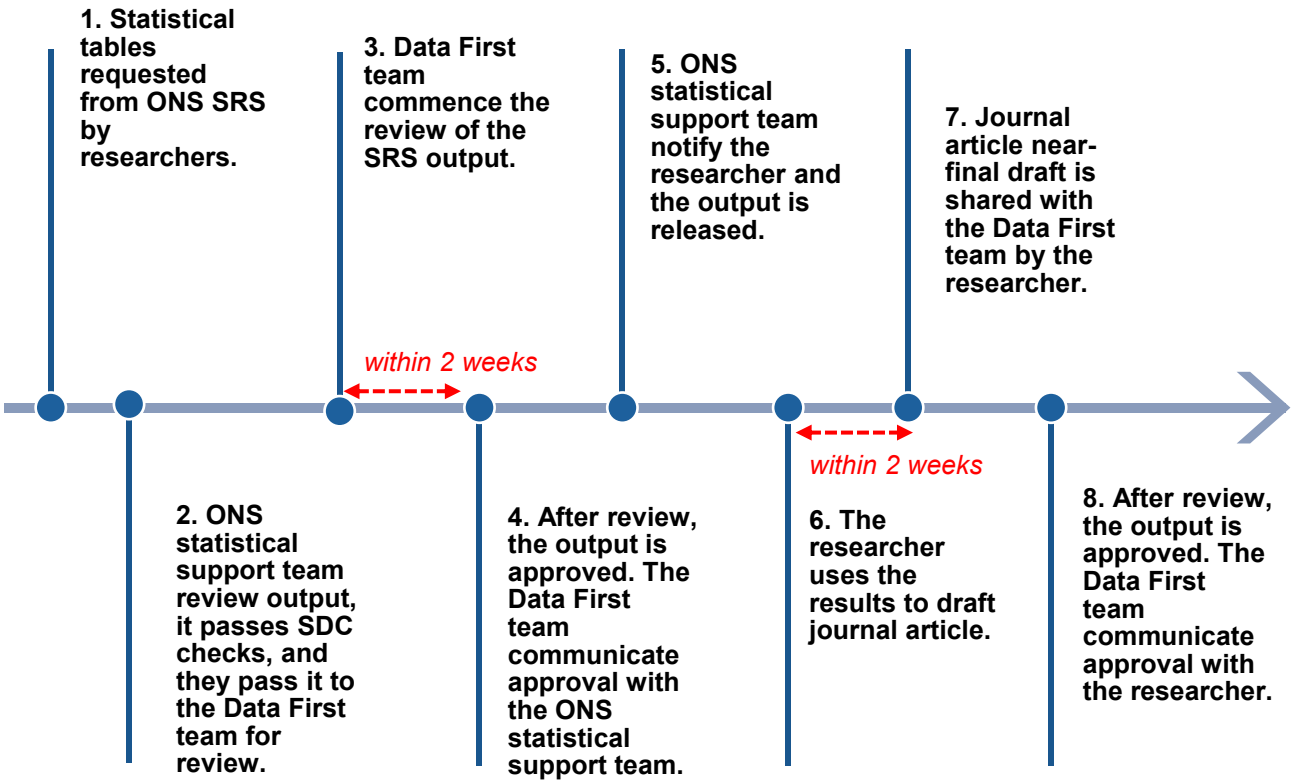
2.3 Code outputs

Researchers may output code for use outside of the SRS. MoJ does not validate code or provide comment of its quality. Prior to clearance of any code files, all data or checksums must be removed from your code files. MoJ will then review your code files to ensure that statistical disclosure control requirements have been met.

3. The output review process

Figure 1 shows an example order of events from a researcher request to output data from the SRS to Data First approval for use in a journal article.

Figure 1: Example review and approval timeline for a Data First output



4. Output review requirements

All types of output must comply with the three core requirements in the table below. There are additional requirements that must also be considered for derived and final outputs.

Requirements	Outputs from a TRE	Derived and final outputs	Further information
Compliance with ONS SRS statistical disclosure control policies	✓	✓	Section 4.1
Within scope of the approved project	✓	✓	Section 4.2
Compliance with any project-specific access conditions attached to approval	✓	✓	Section 4.3
Official disclaimers included in outputs		✓	Section 4.4
Data First datasets are accurately and adequately cited		✓	Section 4.5
No references to individuals, cases, courts or small groups that risk reidentification		✓	Section 4.6
Narrative describes the data objectively and factually		✓*	Section 4.7
Limitations of the analysis are appropriately set out		✓*	Section 4.8

**This requirement applies for projects initiated from September 2026 onward. The Data First team will work pragmatically with existing projects to support implementation where projects/outputs are already in development.*

4.1 Statistical disclosure control

Statistical disclosure control (SDC) is a set of methods used to prevent the identification of individuals or organisations in data.

Although published outputs do not usually allow direct identification, identities can sometimes be inferred by combining information from different sources. Low counts and outliers are among the most common sources of disclosure risk.

For outputs released directly from the ONS SRS, SDC checks are carried out through the SRS output-checking process before outputs leave the TRE. Researchers remain responsible for ensuring that disclosure risks are not introduced when results are reused, combined or presented within reports, articles, presentations or other publications.

Researchers should take particular care when presenting:

- small cell counts;
- detailed subgroup analyses;
- rare characteristics;
- unusual cases; and
- highly granular breakdowns.

Researchers using the ONS SRS should continue to follow ONS guidance on output checking and statistical disclosure control throughout the publication process.

4.2 Within scope of the approved project

Researchers may only analyse and report on Data First data in accordance with their approved project.

The approved project is defined by the approved application, research questions, approved variables and any supporting documentation associated with project approval. For research projects approved since September 2026, any project, datasets specific requirements or restrictions will be clearly set out in a user agreement, signed at the point of project approval.

When reviewing outputs, the Data First team will assess that:

- the output is clearly linked to one or more of the approved research questions;
- the type of output being produced is consistent with the outputs described in the approved application or user agreement;
- only approved datasets and variables have been used;
- any sensitivity analyses, robustness checks, data quality assessments or other methodological steps committed to as part of the approved project have been undertaken, or whether an alternative approach has been agreed through the appropriate project change process; and
- any material limitations relevant to the approved methodology have been sufficiently highlighted.

If researchers wish to undertake analysis outside the scope of their originally approved project, they should seek approval through the appropriate project change process before producing analysis and publishing outputs based on that work.

4.3 Compliance with project-specific conditions

Some Data First projects are approved subject to specific access conditions. These may relate to particular datasets, analytical approaches, reporting requirements, or restrictions on certain forms of analysis or comparison.

All outputs must comply with any conditions attached to project approval. Researchers should ensure they remain familiar with any project-specific requirements when preparing outputs for publication and ensure that if any new researchers are added to the project team, they too are aware of all terms and conditions. These are also set out in your user agreement.

4.4 Required disclaimers

All final outputs intended for dissemination should include any required disclaimers associated with the research environment through which the data were accessed.

Researchers should ensure they are using the current and appropriate disclaimer for their project and research environment. Please find here our disclaimers for ONS SRS outputs.

4.5 Citations

Data First datasets should be accurately and appropriately cited in all outputs.

Where more than one version of a dataset exists, researchers should take care to cite the correct version. Where full dataset citations are not practical, a link to the relevant Data First dataset information may be appropriate.

The ONS' metadata browser provides an example citation and Digital Object Identifier (DOI) for Data First datasets accessed through the SRS. Please contact the Data First team if you are unsure.

4.6 Individuals, establishments, cases, courts or small groups

Outputs will be checked to ensure they do not contain information that could result in the identification of individuals, cases, courts, organisations, establishments, staff members or small groups. Outputs will also be checked to ensure they do not include evaluations or comparisons of the performance of individual courts, tribunals, prisons, probation delivery units, probation regions, or identifiable staff members, or analyses of judicial decisions. These requirements are set out in the Data Processing Agreements between MoJ and ONS SRS.

4.7 Objective reporting

Outputs should describe the data and findings objectively and factually. Assertions should be supported by the analysis presented and should not misrepresent the data, findings or relevant aspects of the justice system.

Where appropriate, outputs may be shared with stakeholders who have responsibility for, or expertise in, the datasets, policy or operational areas covered by the research. Where significant factual inaccuracies are identified that may affect the interpretation of the findings, these may be raised during the review process. However, reviewers will avoid matters of academic judgement that will be addressed through peer review.

4.8 Study limitations

All research has limitations, and good research should be transparent about those that are material to the interpretation of findings. Common examples include:

- data quality issues;
- incomplete or limited coverage;
- linkage limitations;
- missing variables; and
- methodological limitations.

Researchers are not expected to include every limitation. Rather, consideration should be given to whether a limitation is sufficiently important that a reader would need to understand it in order to appropriately interpret the findings.

The level of detail should be proportionate to the nature of the output and its intended audience. For example, a journal article may contain a more detailed discussion of limitations than a blog post or policy briefing.

5. Helping us review your output quickly

Researchers are required to share outputs with the Data First team at least two weeks before peer review, publication, or release, whichever is earliest. Researchers should build sufficient review time into publication and dissemination plans, as review times can vary depending on the number of outputs received and whether additional information is needed to clear the output.

For outputs linked to conferences or fixed publication deadlines, drafts should be shared as early as possible. Early submission helps ensure there is sufficient time to address any questions or disclosure control issues before publication. Where deadlines are tight, researchers should notify the Data First team when submitting their output. While expedited reviews cannot be guaranteed, advance notice is helpful wherever possible.

As part of the review process, the Data First team may request additional to support output clearance. The team will seek any additional information as early as possible within the review cycle and researchers should respond promptly to help avoid delays.

Where an output, or part of an output, has previously been reviewed and approved, researchers should provide the date of approval, any relevant project or output reference numbers, and a brief summary of any substantive changes since the previous review. This might include new analyses, additional tables or figures, revised findings, methodological changes, or revisions made following peer review. Providing this context helps reviewers focus on changes and can significantly speed up the review process.

6. Making changes after review by MoJ

If substantive changes are made after the output has been reviewed by the Data First team, for example following peer review, the revised version must be shared before publication.

The review of revised outputs will be proportionate to the changes made. Minor formatting or editorial changes do not normally require further review. However, outputs should be resubmitted if changes alter the way findings, methods, data or conclusions are presented, discussed or interpreted. Examples may include additional analysis, new findings/tables/figures, revised interpretations or methodological changes.

7. Further support

If you are unsure whether an output requires review, whether planned revisions should be resubmitted, or how the guidance applies to your project, please contact the Data First at datafirst@justice.gov.uk.